# A Programmatic Ecology of Assessment: Using a Common Rubric to Evaluate Multimodal Processes and Artifacts

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## Abstract

Rubrics are important assessment tools and can play a critical role in relation to workload, programmatic consistency, and multimodality. Teachers need supporting tools for multimodal assessment. Multimodal composition curricula can productively use programmatic rubrics when those rubrics are part of an ecology of assessment that prioritizes feedback and adaptation. Addressing factors of value, environment, and scale, an ecology of assessment can use rubrics as a normal part of a writing and communication program, while nonetheless acknowledging that rubrics can be sterile, artificial, and oversimplified. After discussing a rationale for rubrics and the ways in which a programmatic rubric can be adapted, a specific case study illustrates the application of a programmatic rubric for the design, development, and assessment of a game project in a first-year English composition class. The article concludes by speculating about directions for research and pedagogy to strengthen multimodal assessment.
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Games in composition classes? Absolutely. Assessment of games in composition classes? Certainly. Scalability that allows assessment of games across multiple composition classes? Yes, that too. We use rubrics for the assessment of projects such as games as well as for other multimodal projects—rubrics that both meet our programmatic outcomes and are adaptable to projects developed by teachers. These flexible rubrics respond to student, teacher, programmatic, institutional, legal, and theoretical needs.

A brief example illustrates the flexibility of our rubric: Amanda Madden (article co-author) designed a game project for students in her first-year composition course, which emphasized literary and historical adaptation in popular culture. The course's final project asked students to apply what they learned by adapting a historical or literary theme into a playable game they then presented to the class. Students designed one of several types of games, including choose-your-own-adventure digital games based on local campus culture, board games using historical or literary characters and events, and playground games borrowing themes from H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*.

The programmatic rubric identified rhetorical outcomes and enabled students doing this project to see how their competencies in analysis and composition built upon one another. The game project provided an engaging and useful vehicle for students to compose written, oral, and visual artifacts and use a rubric to assess the multimodal outcomes.

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While the students were tech savvy and came to the course accustomed to composing in writing, they were less familiar with composing in oral and visual modes. Introducing them to multimodal composing through assignments like games, podcasts, and videos required Madden to provide a framework for composing across and within several modes and media. Quite reasonably, Madden's students asked, "How will the game be assessed and graded?" Teachers should be prepared to answer this question for any project, including games, podcasts, and videos. As students learn to compose in new ways, a rubric not only can scaffold them to meet teacher expectations, but it can also help them to understand how they are being assessed, which increases their confidence. Of course, any good rubric should do these things; what we're arguing is that a rubric necessarily needs to do more.

In this article, we first show rubrics can do more within what we define as a programmatic ecology of assessment. Then we discuss the specific ways our program uses rubrics to assess rhetoric, process, and multimodality within such an ecology, ways that have intellectual integrity, work toward programmatic coherence, and encourage conversations within and beyond the program. Following that discussion, we take a closer look at how the rubric was used in Madden's game assignment. Finally, we propose new directions for multimodal assessment research and pedagogy.

## 1. Defining a programmatic ecology of assessment

As assessment of writing has necessarily evolved in accordance with theory, curriculum, and technology, the assessment of multimodal artifacts is also evolving (Anderson et al., 2006; Neal, 2011). This evolution occurs across multiple modes and disciplines (e.g., visual rhetoric, communication studies, media studies, computer science) in a rapidly changing environment. In short, multimodal assessment takes concerns of written assessment, such as programmatic consistency and teacher workload, and complicates them with new factors that students, teachers, and administrators must consider (Adsanatham et al., 2013), including assessment of artifacts in a variety of modes.

As one way of navigating the complexity of multimodality, we argue that multimodal composition curricula can productively use programmatic rubrics when those rubrics are part of an ecology of assessment that prioritizes feedback and adaptation. In this section, we define a programmatic ecology of assessment and then address factors of value, environment, and scale as important background for understanding that ecology.

What is a programmatic ecology of assessment? When we use the word "ecology," we draw upon the work of Margaret A. Syverson (1999), who used the word to describe the "numerous interrelated complex systems" (Syverson, 1999, p. 2) that comprise composition. Like Syverson, we believe such systems include not only "writers, readers, and texts" but also "environmental structures" and "other complex systems operating at various levels of scale." Environmental structures, Syverson noted, may include "pens, paper, computers, books, telephones, fax machines, photocopiers, printing presses, and other natural and human constructed features," while the other complex systems within the particular ecology of composition may include "families, global economies, publishing systems, theoretical frames, academic disciplines, and language itself" (p. 5). In short, Syverson defined an ecology as "a kind of meta-complex system composed of interrelated and interdependent complex systems and their environmental structures and processes" (p. 5).

Christopher Manion and Richard Selfe (2012) described the value of Syverson's model in their assessment of wiki assignments in three courses they studied. Like Manion and Selfe, we see value in what they called Syverson's "careful examination of the interrelationships among actors, artifacts, and environments as they develop over time" (p. 27). Unlike Manion and Selfe's focus on an ecology of assessment within particular courses, we propose an ecology of assessment using Syverson's formulation that operates on the programmatic level—including the complex systems of program administration, teachers, students, courses, and other stakeholders within the broader complex systems of disciplinary research and theory, institutional goals, and societal needs.

Within an ecology of assessment, teachers can use rubrics while simultaneously acknowledging that some rubrics may be inadequate—too often sterile, artificial, and oversimplified. We challenge the notion that all rubrics are inadequate and argue that rubrics can have value by focusing on selected rhetorical factors to assess multimodal artifacts, can provide an environment for programmatic consistency, and can help manage the enormity of a teacher's workload as it scales up. Appropriately designed and implemented, rubrics can help students become capable self-critics and peer-reviewers as they create artifacts that can become part of their portfolios.